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SUBJECT Interview Of Stansfield Turner

BILL KURTIS: Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner is trying to publish a book and get it by the CIA censors, and he put the squeeze on a similar attempt when he was Director.

Is turnabout fair play? He'll be with us this half-hour.

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SUSAN SPENCER: As Director of the CIA under President Carter, Stansfield Turner had a former agent prosecuted for failing to clear his book with CIA censors. Now, Admiral Turner is in a dispute with his former agency which wants to censor the book that he is writing.

Admiral Turner is in our Washington studios. Good morning, sir. Thank you for coming in.

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Thank you, Susan.

SPENCER: Well, what about it? Is turnabout fair play?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's not really turnabout. Frank Snepp came to me and told me he was going to clear his book with the CIA. He did not do so. He published it surreptitiously without ever giving us a chance to look at it for security reasons.

I'm going through the legal process. I'm clearing it with the CIA.

I'd like to say, though, that the press has rather exaggerated the problem that we have today. There are some differences I have with the CIA, but we're just in the beginning stages of negotiation. I have every reason to expect that we're going to be able to work those out. All this report is a bit premature.

SPENCER: Obviously, you're not going to be very specific, but can you tell us in general terms what it is that the CIA is objecting to?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Certainly. There's a basic difference of philosophy here. It existed when I was the Director of the CIA.

Many people in the CIA feel that almost everything about the CIA ought to be kept secret. I happen to believe that when you classify too much information it's difficult to keep any of it secret. People simply don't respect the secret label.

SPENCER: Well, excuse me. Are you talking about anecdotes that might embarrass the agency, or are you talking about very -- about political information, or about information about the agency's activities abroad?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't believe the agency has tried to censor things from me that embarrass the agency, because they've cleared some things I've put in there that are not necessarily favorable. On balance, I think the book will be favorable to the agency because I have great respect for it. But they are just working on what they think is secret.

But, as I say, when you over-classify people don't respect it and they start talking about it because they think it really isn't classified, and then they inadvertently cross the line and disclose real secrets.

SPENCER: Well, have standards changed that much since you were there? I mean, one would think that you of all people wouldn't put something in a book that anybody at the CIA would think was classified information.

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I -- I don't think I have put any classified information in it, Susan, but there is this difference in philosophy where they want to tighten up even more than I think is reasonable.

You know, you have to recognize that one of the strengths of a democratic society is a well-informed public, and I believe that the more the CIA can release without hurting its own way of doing business the better informed our public will be, the stronger our country will be.

SPENCER: But you think at the moment, anyway, that they're classifying too much?

ADMIRAL TURNER: A little bit too much, yes. But I think we'll be able to work these differences out.

SPENCER: You don't expect to have to sue over this?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I don't think that's likely to be the case.

SPENCER: You can understand, though, why -- why some people might find this a little bit ironic. You're sort of known as the architect of censorship for the CIA.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I don't think I deserve that title.

But the irony is this: what the book is about is not just a memoir, the book is about the physical problem of conducting secret intelligence in an open democratic society. That's a very tough problem, and one of the problems is how much information you release. If you keep everything secret, you end up with the risk of abuses and errors, like we've had in the past. If you don't keep enough secrets, then the CIA just can't do the important job that it has to do for our country.

SPENCER: You're convinced that it's not going to be a secret book, though?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I....

SPENCER: You'll get this worked out?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I certainly don't want to publish anything that is truly secret.

SPENCER: Thank you very much.